



GUIDE TO PROMOTING GENDER EQUITY IN RECRUITMENT & HIRING



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WOMEN AND GIRLS INITIATIVE

On December 13, 2016, the Board of Supervisors adopted a motion establishing the Los Angeles County Initiative on Women and Girls (WGI). Through partnership with County departments and public partners, the WGI aims to establish Los Angeles County as a leader in creating opportunities and improving outcomes for all women and girls. To support these efforts, the WGI will apply a gender lens when the County acts as an employer, a service provider, and as a partner to enhance equity and justice, increase leadership opportunities and capacity, and create innovative pathways and partnerships.



DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES

With more than 110,000 employees working across over 35 departments, Los Angeles County is the largest employer in Southern California. The Los Angeles County Department of Human Resources is dedicated to providing effective and efficient talent solutions to our County partners by recruiting, developing, and retaining exceptional and diverse talent for public service. The vision of the Department of Human Resources is to lead the way in HR excellence through innovation, collaboration, and customer service.

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PROMOTING GENDER EQUITY IN RECRUITMENT AND HIRING

I. PURPOSE

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors recognizes the significant impact of implicit bias on employee recruitment and selection, and other workplace practices that impact service delivery to County residents. As such, the Board has required that all County managers and employees be trained in recognizing and effectively reducing implicit bias in the workplace. In addition, the Board directed County departments and community partners to review and assess national best practices related to the development and implementation of implicit bias and cultural competency trainings. Accordingly, these guidelines and protocols serve as a model to increase the collective cultural competency of the County, community partners, and businesses that operate within the County, and to prevent actual and/or potential gender inequities that could result from the influence of implicit bias and systemic social and cultural conditioning.

Specifically, the purpose of this guide is to highlight the importance and value of incorporating gender-neutral language in all elements of recruitment and hiring as one means of reducing implicit bias. By being conscious of gender-related considerations and proactively applying a gender-neutral lens to recruitment and hiring materials and protocols, public and private employers within Los Angeles County can advance their efforts to attract and maintain the best talent, close gender gaps within the workforce, and make the delivery of all services within the County of Los Angeles inclusive and respectful of the diverse populations the County serves.

II. LANGUAGE AND THE POTENTIAL FOR BIAS IN RECRUITMENT AND HIRING PROCESSES

Studies have shown that our minds create shortcuts to help us access information, navigate through the world and make decisions. It is human nature to categorize things, including people. “We create schemas, mental frameworks of beliefs, feelings and assumptions about people, groups, objects...We use these schemas to incorporate new information so that we do not have to treat all new information as through it is totally unfamiliar.”¹ Unfortunately, these shortcuts can become sources of unintentional implicit bias, which may influence our ongoing attitudes, understanding, actions, and decisions about people who fit into stereotypes we unconsciously hold.² As we are typically unaware that we view the world through selective lenses, these biases may be incorrectly perceived as fact, rather than opinion.

There are several types of implicit bias that can affect recruitment and hiring practices in the workplace:

- **Confirmation bias:** The tendency to seek out information that conforms to one’s pre-existing views, and ignore information that goes against those views
- **In-group bias:** The tendency to favor members of your own group

- **Projection bias:** The thinking that others have the same priority, attitude or belief as you do
- **Selective perception bias:** The process of relying on our own perceptions while in-taking information, and ignoring information that contradicts our beliefs and expectations
- **Status quo bias:** A preference for the current state of affairs³

Implicit bias can have a detrimental effect on the hiring process because unconscious bias in the search process makes it difficult to recruit and attract the most qualified candidates. Adopting strategies to promote the awareness of implicit bias in all steps of the hiring processes provides opportunities to diversify the candidate pool and ultimately, our workforce. “There is no design-free world. Organizations must decide how to search for and select future employees. How they advertise open positions, where they post job openings, how they evaluate applicants, how they create short lists, how they interview candidates and how they make their final selections are all part of choice architecture.”⁴

Keys for Recruiting Women



As late as the 1970s only 5% of musicians performing in the top U.S. orchestras were women. By 2016, that number jumped to 35%. This was accomplished by implementing performance-based blind auditions, which increased the likelihood of females advancing past the first round of auditions by 50%, thereby increasing the opportunity for women to be selected.

This example shows why the design of hiring processes matter. It is important to consider potential built-in bias and design hiring processes that reduce the opportunity for bias. In the above example, female candidates were consistently ranked lower than male candidates, resulting in very few female hires. Removing evaluators’ knowledge of the gender of the candidates as they auditioned created more objective evaluations of female candidates. A simple change in process significantly increased the likelihood that females would be hired for male-dominated orchestra positions.

III. POTENTIAL HIRING BIAS (AN INTERSECTIONAL REVIEW)

There are several ways in which implicit or sometimes explicit bias has the potential to influence the hiring process:

- **Bias by Gender:** Resumes of candidates with male names are viewed as more competent and hireable and are offered higher starting salaries than candidates’ resumes that use female names. Further, in studies a “Brian” was more likely to be hired than a “Karen” with the same qualifications.⁵

- *Bias by Race*: Applicants with traditionally African-American names (i.e. Jamal and Lakisha) were required to send out 50% more resumes to get the same number of callbacks as applicants with traditionally Caucasian names (i.e. Emily and Greg).⁶
- *Bias by Sexual Orientation*: With identical resumes, applicants listed as being the treasurer of a gay student organization got 40% fewer requests for interviews than applicants listed as being the treasurer of an environmental student organization.⁷
- *Bias by Parental Status*: With identical resumes, non-mothers received twice as many call backs as mothers. There was no difference in the number of call backs between fathers and non-fathers. Studies reflect that gender bias in this category only applies to women.⁸

As the Dean of Harvard Kennedy School of Public Policy, Co-chair of Harvard's Business Insights Group and author of "*What Works: Gender Equality by Design*," Dr. Bohnet concludes, "Our minds are stubborn beasts that are hard to change, but it's not that hard to de-bias the application process."⁹ Employers have an opportunity to close gender gaps in the workforce by adopting gender neutral recruitment and hiring practices as a way of reducing implicit bias.

IV. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY GENDER-NEUTRAL RECRUITMENT AND HIRING PRACTICES?

The way gender is programmed into basic language is associated with societal gender equality.¹⁰ The English language is inherently a gender-neutral language, meaning it does not include masculine or feminine forms of words. However, research shows that English speakers still strongly associate certain jobs or nouns that describe job duties with men or women. As a result, gender stereotypes are incorporated in their mental representations of jobs. These gendered associations can lead to gender discrimination in who applies and who gets hired.

➤ **Examples of obvious gender coding: fireman, craftsman and lineman**

Problem: The use of "man" in these job titles can and do discourage women from applying.

County of Los Angeles uses instead: firefighter, crafts support, and power equipment technician

The most visible aspect of recruitment that influences the makeup of a candidate pool is job postings. In job advertisements or postings, words are the primary tool for employers to communicate with potential employees, and academic research has shown that many common words used in job descriptions have male or female associations.¹¹ Creating a gender-neutral approach to recruitment and hiring is essential because language used to describe job opportunities matters most to potential applicants at this initial stage.¹² The concept of "gender coded" job listings refers to the use of male-skewing or female-skewing terms in job descriptions. Simply put, the words used in job descriptions could repel or attract candidates based on their gender. The

most qualified candidates may not apply to opportunities because they are “turned off” by the language used in the job posting.

➤ **Example of signal gender coding:** Elementary school ad seeking “a committed teacher with exceptional pedagogical and interpersonal skills to work in a supportive, collaborative work environment.”

Problem: “Supportive” and “collaborative” are traditionally associated with feminine traits and statistically will reduce the number of male applicants for the position.¹³

In both examples where gender coded language is obvious (fireman) and where gender coded language is a signal (supportive elementary school teacher), the results can be the same, the applicant pool may be heavily male or female, and the profession could continue to skew towards a specific gender concentration. In other words, men are drawn to jobs that are traditionally done by men, and women are drawn to jobs that are traditionally done by women.

V. WHY IS GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE IMPORTANT?

Research shows that implementing a gender neutral approach to recruitment and hiring language **improves** the attraction of potential candidates and supports a more equitable subsequent hiring process because the employer is expanding the applicant pool to allow for a reflection of the diversity of experiences, talents and qualifications of the entire population. Research has shown that removing bias language from recruitment materials increases the number of applicants for a position,¹⁴ reduces the time it takes to hire qualified candidates,¹⁵ and leads to higher retention rates of employees.¹⁶ Further, increasing gender diversity in the workforce is also good for business. Gender diverse companies in the private sector are 15% more likely to outperform those that are not gender diverse,¹⁷ and private industry companies that have at least 30% female executives in their boardrooms make as much as 6% more profit than companies without women at the executive level.¹⁸

VI. ELEMENTS OF RECRUITMENT AND HIRING

Within the recruitment and hiring processes, there are several sources of potential gender bias that can 1) reduce the number of men/women applying for a certain position or 2) harm an applicant’s chance of being selected for the position. These sources include the following documents or practices:

- A. Job Advertisements
- B. Positions Descriptions/ Requirements
- C. Resumes/Curriculum Vitae (CV)
- D. Letters of Recommendation
- E. Interviews

The following information provides guidelines to promote a more gender neutral approach for each of the processes listed above. The goal is to promote gender equity

across all professions within the County and its community partners, and to address common recruitment and hiring practices that are known to impact women's participation and success rates in obtaining jobs.

A. Gender-Neutral Job Advertisements

A job advertisement or posting is the very first stage in the process of attracting talent. Hence, it is important that recruitment efforts do not exclude female or male candidates at the onset of the process. Research shows that job advertisements used in historically male-oriented sectors; such as technology, finance, science, and construction; showed a greater use of words with male connotations such as 'leader', 'competitive' and 'dominant'. The study also found that when more masculine wording was used in the advertisements, it was perceived by potential applicants that more men worked in that sector. Masculine wording also made this sector less appealing for women, making them less likely to apply for jobs.¹⁹ According to research, 70% of job listings across all industries contain masculine words.²⁰

Keys for Recruiting Women



Simple word choices can keep women, especially women of color, from applying. The term "the best of the best" is typically taken as a signal that the company is looking for males and that the work environment is ultra-competitive. For example, "competitive salary" can be problematic because women, who are less likely to negotiate, may take it as a signal that they'll have to haggle over pay. The phrase "we need a killer sales representative" may discourage females from applying. In all instances, women will be significantly less likely to apply for the job.¹⁸

The following best practices can be used to improve the language in job ads²¹ and as a result, the outcomes:

Recommendation 1: Use gender-neutral titles. Male-oriented titles can inadvertently prevent women from clicking on a job in a list of search results. Avoid including words in titles like "hacker," "rock star," "superhero," "guru," and "ninja," and instead use neutral, descriptive titles like "engineer," "project manager," or "developer."

- Example: On average, on the job site Indeed, 800+ job listings include the word "ninja" intending to mean that the company is looking for an aggressive candidate and/or expert in the field. However, the Japanese origin of ninja was a man and suggests physical combat or prowess.²²

Recommendation 2: Check pronouns. When describing the tasks of the ideal candidate, use "their," "the candidate," or "you."

- Example: "As Product Manager for XYZ, **you** will be responsible for setting the product vision and strategy."

Recommendation 3: Avoid (or balance) the use of gender-charged words. Analysis from augmented language tools found that the gender language bias in an organization’s job posting can predict the gender of the person hired. For example, the words “analyze” and “determine” are typically associated with male traits, while the words “collaborate” and “support” are associated with female traits.

Below are examples of gender-coded language often featured in job advertisements.

| Feminine-Coded Words | Masculine-Coded Words |
|---|--|
| agree, commit, cooperate, depend, honest, interpersonal, loyal, support, together, understood | active, adventurous, challenge, confident, decision, driven, independent, lead, objective, opinion |
| Recommended Gender Neutral Words | |
| collaborative, team, positive, goal oriented, motivated | |

The use of an augmented language tool can help eliminate problematic language and provide suggestions for more gender inclusive language in advertisements. For example, the following firefighter job advertisement was scored by the augmented writing software system Textio as an 18 out of 100 for gender inclusiveness:

ESSENTIAL JOB FUNCTIONS: *Performs firefighting and rescue duties in all types of fires and in other emergency situations, and enforces the fire prevention code.*

Review by an augmented language tool returned a score of 64 out of 100 for gender inclusiveness by implementing the following changes:

ESSENTIAL JOB FUNCTIONS: *A job is a job, right? Not for us. We spend our time at work helping people in their greatest times of need. Are you like us? Are you passionate about helping others? Are you interested in being in the right place at the right time?*

We want people like you to help us support the 10 million residents of the area we call home. Join our team. In this job, you will perform firefighting and rescue duties in all types of fire and emergency situations while following and ensuring our California Fire Prevention Code.

Language programs created to analyze the impact of language on job applications have identified over 25,000 problematic phrases that have statistically been proven to bias applicant pools toward males/females. The table below provides the most frequently used male gendered language in job advertisements and should be avoided when posting County job advertisements.

Most frequent gender problematic terms:

| | | | |
|------------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|
| Ambitious | Boastful | Foosball | Stock options |
| Analytical | Chairman | Ninja | Strong |
| Assertive | Competitive | Hierarchical | Takes risks |
| Autonomous | Salary | Rigid | Workforce |
| Best of the best | Dominate | Silicon Valley | |

The use of language specifically designed to attract women has been implemented in industries that have traditionally had problems recruiting women with positive results. For example, the augmented language software system Textio has reported substantial use of its product by technology firms, including Netflix, Airbnb, Medium, and Pandora.²³ Below is a list of most common language for attracting female applicants to job advertisements.

Common language used to attract more female applicants:

| | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Adaptable | Multitasking | Self-aware |
| Choose | Health | Socially responsible |
| Collaborate | Imaginative | Thoughtful |
| Creative | Intuitive | Trustworthy |
| Curious | Leans in | Up-to-date |
| Excellent | Plans for the future | Wellness program |
| Flexible schedule | Resilient | |

Recommendation 4: Avoid superlatives. Excessive use of superlatives such as “expert,” “superior,” or “world class” can deter female candidates who are traditionally more collaborative than competitive in nature. Research also shows that women are less likely than men to brag about their accomplishments.²⁴ In addition, superlatives related to a candidate’s background can limit the pool of female applicants because there may be very few females currently in leading positions at “world class” firms.²⁵

B. Gender-Neutral Position Descriptions:

Eliminating the use of gendered language in position descriptions can also impact the number, experience, and diversity of an applicant pool. ZipRecruiter summarized this impact the following way:

When employers write job descriptions, the goal is that the person with the right skills and experience will read the job ad and apply. What we found was that many employers were lowering their chances at finding the right candidate and didn't even realize it. When gendered language is removed from the equation, companies are left with a higher chance of scoring the best candidate for the job. Job listings with gendered language attracted an average of 12 responses, while job listings with gender-neutral language attracted an average of 17 responses.²⁶

Further research shows that women felt less personal investment, were more ostracized and had lower expectations of how long they will stay in a particular job when recruitment materials feature masculine language and masculine pronouns.²⁷ When considering job position listings, here are some additional best practices to follow to create gender-neutral postings:²⁸

Recommendation 1: Focus on the quality, not quantity, of requirements. Identify which requirements are “nice to have” versus “must have” (i.e., minimum requirements) and eliminate any nonessential “nice to have” from the mandatory position requirements.

Keys for Recruiting Women



Studies have shown that many women won't apply for a job they do not 100% qualify for, whereas men will apply for a position they feel they're only 60% qualified for. The more qualifications or requirements you list, the more you reduce the likelihood of female applicants.²⁹

Recommendation 2: Reconsider the major requirements for the position. Listing a specific college major as a requirement can limit the number of applicants to one gender in favor of the other. Glassdoor Economic Research found that choice of college major can vary by gender, and you may be limiting your candidate pool by unnecessarily requiring completion of a specific degree. Emphasizing physical requirements that are not common or are infrequent features of the job also limits the candidate pool.³⁰

- Example: A standard clerical office job that requires applicants to “lift 50 lbs.” will result in fewer women applying for this job due to the physical requirement. Instead, the requirement should focus on the essential clerical duties such as entering data into a computer and answering telephone calls, and leave off a weight lifting requirement.
- Example: Specifically requiring a BS degree, when women are more likely to have a BA degree in a similar major, i.e., BA in Biology vs. BS in Biology will result in limiting your female applicant pool. Instead, the requirement should read: “bachelor’s degree in biology or bachelor’s degree in science” to maximize your applicant pool.

Employers that include the following additional policy statements in their position descriptions are viewed as more equitable and as having more favorable work environments to prospective employees (females in particular):³¹

- Express your commitment to equality and diversity. Candidates want to know they’ll be welcome in the culture before they make the effort to apply. A simple statement toward the end of a job description lets candidates know that you intend to make the workplace a friendly one.
- Infuse well-defined value statements that promote diversity into your job descriptions, or list them out.

- Promote volunteer and employee activities that involve career building or mentorship opportunities.
- State your family-friendly benefits in position descriptions. Parental leave, flextime, and child care subsidies benefit families and your future base of employees.

The following is a checklist of questions to ask when writing position descriptions. Your answers to these questions will inform you of the presence of gendered language or gender bias in how your job vacancies are presented to the job seeking world.

1. Are all of the “required” criteria listed necessary for doing this job well?
2. Do the criteria allow candidates to demonstrate important life experiences that may not show up on traditional resumes?
3. Do any of the criteria reflect unnecessary assumptions or biases about the “kind of person” who usually does the job?
4. Do you include criteria such as “ability to work on diverse teams or with a diverse range of people?”
5. Could additional criteria be included that would open up possibilities for a broader range of excellent candidates?
6. Does any of the language in the description describe people rather than behaviors or subtly reflect stereotypes?³²

C. Gender Bias in Resume/Curriculum Vitae (CV) Evaluation

In Section III. Potential Hiring Bias (An Intersectional Review), we discussed ways in which implicit bias in resume review can help/hinder an applicant’s ability to be selected for an interview. Research finds that the same resume will receive different scores across gendered and racial lines. To further illustrate potential gender bias in resume reviews, Harvard conducted a series of selection studies where participants were asked to hire a candidate for a typically male task: performing a math problem, and a typically female task: a word assignment. Participants were paid based on the performance of the individual they hired. The researchers found that when participants were presented with one candidate at a time, they almost always selected males for the math task and females for the word task, even though they had sometimes performed lower than the candidate of the opposite gender. When participants evaluated candidates in groups comparatively, the gender gap completely vanished, and the participant chose the top performer.³³

The following are good rules to follow concerning reviewing Resumes/CVs:³⁴

Recommendation 1: Establish clear criteria before reviewing materials and have them available during reviews and apply them uniformly.

Recommendation 2: Create standard candidate information checklists—for all candidates.

Following these two rules will help reduce bias in the way criteria are considered and weighted by evaluators and ensures resume review is based on only essential qualities/qualifications to being successful in the advertised position.

D. Gender Bias in Reference Review

Even the most enthusiastic references often use gender-coded language in their evaluation of an individual, particularly when summarizing their work habits. Typically, when people recommend men for a given position, they are more action-oriented descriptors—ambitious, dominant, self-confident, and provide more references to individual accomplishments. By contrast, when people recommend women for a given position, they are more communal descriptors—affectionate, nurturing, and provide more references to personal life and team achievements.³⁵ Recommendations that feature more personal/affectionate language or reference personal situations are taken less seriously by those evaluating letters of recommendation.

Recommendation 1: To reduce gender bias introduced into the hiring process by outside references replace the requirement for letters of recommendation with references that employers can contact to access the relevant information for review.

Recommendation 2: It is important to screen reference materials for bias triggers by unaffiliated third parties that are out of control of the applicant. It is also important to flag potential triggers for ways bias may be activated, i.e., recommendations that lead to assumptions about social identity rather than professional qualification.³⁶

- Example: A recommender is emphasizing that “Jennifer is a rising star within the company.” References to youth in recommendations for female applicants trigger bias against mothers in the workforce. Employers may overlook female applicants that they believe will take time off for family activities. Such bias does not exist for male applicants.
- Example of an evaluation that is received differently for male and female applicants: “One of Emily’s/Tim’s main attributes is her/his persistence and diligence, sometimes even ranging with obsession, with work.” Emily is perceived as shrill and her work ethic makes her difficult to work with; Tim is perceived to be a go-getter and his work ethic is valued.

E. Interview Process

To reduce gender bias in the interview process, the primary recommendation is to install a significant degree of structure before interviews, during interviews, and following interviews. Lack of formalized structure in the interview process can lead to a great deal of bias being introduced into the hiring process.

In a study across several traditionally gendered professions, sociologist Lauren Rivera found that interviewers commonly looked for someone like themselves in interviews. Concluding, “Replicating ourselves in hiring contributes to the prevalent gender segregations of jobs, with, for example, male bankers hiring male bankers and female teachers hiring female teachers.”³⁷ Further research found that a lack of structure in the interview process leads interviewers to grade candidates on their *perceptions* of the candidate rather than more objective measures.³⁸ The following rules will help reduce bias in interviews, gender bias in particular:

Pre-Interview:

Recommendation 1: Discussing implicit bias with the interview committee.³⁹ Providing hiring managers with training, like Los Angeles County’s implicit bias and cultural competency workshops, is invaluable in helping interviewers to see bias of which they may be unaware. A refresher update on this training may be a good way to begin pre-interview steps.



Keys for Recruiting Women

Not all implicit bias training incorporates gender; it is important that interviewers receive gender-specific implicit bias training. Gender bias training should also include an intersectional approach, as research shows candidates judged the most harshly are consistently African-American women.⁴⁰

Recommendation 2: Providing the interview committee with recommended procedures and strategies for evaluating candidates.⁴¹ Streamline the evaluation criteria and make procedures and scoring sheets clear to interviewers before interviews take place. Script the interview! Apply predetermined criteria to all levels of deliberation. Good process predetermines follow ups, who asks, and the order of the discussion.⁴²

Recommendation 3: Provide questions in advance. Providing the questions to interviewees in advance assures you are not privileging specific response skill sets and that the committee is getting the best answers from all candidates.⁴³

Post Interview:

Recommendation 1: Leave ample time for interview committee members to formulate their evaluations and deliberate on group decisions. When people feel rushed they tend to fall back on stereotypes and schemas to evaluate new information and make decisions. This increases bias in decision-making.⁴⁴

Recommendation 2: Look for bias. After all interviews are conducted, it is recommended the panel of interviewers answer the questions listed below about their process.⁴⁵ If the team responds “no” to all questions, the interview process was conducted in a gender-neutral manner (these questions also consider intersectionality

of candidates, which is also important to evaluate). Should your team respond “yes” to these questions, the interview process should be further reviewed:

- Are women, men and gender non-conforming candidates subjected to different expectations?
- Have women, men and gender non-conforming candidate accomplishments been undervalued by attributing them to colleagues or their previous supervisors?
- Are assumptions about family responsibilities or structures influencing assessments of merit?

VII. CONCLUSION

Language is the basis of our societal norms and cultural expectations. The language used to attract and recruit potential employees shape which experiences, talents and qualifications ultimately make up the workforce. By being mindful of the implicit bias and subtle cues associated with certain words in how jobs are presented to the public and by applying a gender-neutral lens to how the hiring process is conducted, employers within the County of Los Angeles, and across the nation, can attract and maintain the best talent.

The adoption of these best practices by public and private employers across Los Angeles County will improve the experiences of employees and clients alike, and further the County’s mission “to enrich lives through effective and caring service.”

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